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DISCUSSION

Dense Struggle (IV): The Ghostly Real

LUIS ESLAVA — 30 September, 2015



This post appeared first on Critical Legal Thinking.

As I mentioned in the last post, one of the most perplexing circumstances that surrounded the appearance of the ghost in the refuge was that it occurred at the precise moment at which the group of IDPs formally entered into the realm of the official. It could have easily occurred earlier, when they were protesting, in perhaps more difficult conditions, at Plaza de Bolívar or Parque Tercer Milenio. But instead, the ghost waited for the group to get closer to the official order — to get within the official as such, as symbolized by the refuge — before revealing herself.

In many significant ways, therefore, the emergence of the ghost during the protest at this point ran against the notion of the official – with all of its different practices, logics, spaces and levels of government – as the site of secular political practices, economic circulation, and social reproduction. It ran against the view of the official as the archetypal, the already-disenchanted, realm of capitalist modernity. The official as the “iron cage”. [1] When the group came face-to-face with the official, what they found was, instead, a site inundated with obscure practices, inbuilt biases, administrative uncertainties, and above all, a place in which to learn that their situation was their own problem, regardless of what the law “said”.

This was, of course, a hard lesson to learn. The official, as embedded in the state, remained the main, the hegemonic, space for ensuring their political existence in this world, and perhaps the only agent able to help them to engage with the economic system on a less unequal footing (photo. 20).



Photo. 20. IDP marching in the streets of Bogotá and calling the state to fulfill its obligations towards displaced population

according to National Law 387/1997: “Displaced population is part of Colombia. Fulfill Law 387” (June, 2009). L. Eslava.

But as the days in the refuge dragged on, one after the other, it was confirmed to this group of IDPs that the state, and the political and economic order in which the state was embedded, were not prepared to respond to their claims. And with this, the group came to understand that the current order, instead of being an already disenchanted place, was in fact still a site plagued with erratic, mysterious behaviors.

So instead of disenchantment as such, what the group began to experience as it got closer to the official order was the “pedagogy of disenchantment” that I referred to earlier: a process designed to teach them not to aspire too much, and to remain conscious of their place within the grand scheme of things. They had to learn to restrain their aspirations and endure the violence that they had experienced and were continuing to experience. In particular, they were taught not to look too closely at the shadowy side of their times – of our current times.

The emergence of the ghost was compatible with this obscurity. And in being so, this inexplicable figure responded – paradoxically – to the need of the group to make sense of their situation. The appearance of the ghost in the refuge was not the return of pre-modern imaginaries within secular times. It was, instead, a contemporary form of phantasmagoria attuned to the mysterious operations of the current global order, its laws and its economic forces. [2] As Freud would have put it, human sites inundated of phantasmagoria like nightmares, dreams and ghostly appearances, are all products which result from conditions that are part of “normal” life. [3] Ghosts appear when that

“normal” life has ‘become so intolerably distressing that the threatened ego throws itself into the arms of the unconscious instinctual forces in a desperate revolt.’ [4] (photo 21)



Photo. 21. IDP's refuge (May, 2009). L. Eslava.

Yet, all in all, the ghost had a positive side. Although frightening at night, it served as a common reference-point for conversation during the day. And this was incredibly important for the group given the harsh situation that they were experiencing, and the long, monotonous days, with little food, that they spent at the refuge waiting for news from the authorities. The very incommensurability of the ghost also seems to have been a kind of sublime response to the way in which the official order (occasionally) addressed their needs. At a point in which the group realized that the state was only ready to interact with them as second-class citizens, and through limited bureaucratic means (i.e. through the temporary housing solution or occasional vouchers to buy a limited array of staples), the ghost

appeared to somehow legitimate the deepness of the group's vulnerability (photo. 22).



Photo. 22. Vouchers given to IDPs to buy basic staples (August, 2009). L. Eslava.

Of course, the legitimization offered by the ghost was beyond a state-centric logic. It was incomprehensible to authorities and, even worse, it was read as an affirmation of the rural background and low formal education level of the group. And it is maybe because of this ineffectiveness of the ghost that she ceased to appear in the nights of the refuge at some point. As the frustration of the group of IDPs grew, the less she appeared. By the time that the group decided to sign the agreement with the local administration and stop their protest they were exhausted at all levels, and she was long gone.

In one conversation, not long after they had signed the agreement, one of the members of the group told me that the authorities had used an old strategy with them, employed by hunters in the jungles of Colombia. In order to capture monkeys, hunters often drove the animals to their

caves. Once there, the hunters would just wait for the monkeys at the entrance, until, thanks to lack of food or drink, monkeys would eventually try to escape. Drained of energy, the monkeys, like the IDPs, re-entered the world only to hand themselves over to their hunters. After all of these years, the mixture of dispassionate technique and violence enclosed in this analogy is still the best illustration that I can think of to describe what the group of IDPs experienced during their protest. When they signed the agreement, they were physically and politically emasculated, and as such they were well on the road of disenchantment. But this happened while they were still well aware of all of those otherworldly forces underpinning their fate.

What to do then with the appearance of a ghost in the midst of a popular struggle? I think we can see the start of an answer to this question in a recent article by Oishik Sircar. [5]

Commenting on the limits of law in contemporary India – a country like many others (if not all) saturated with rule of law and human rights talk – Sircar unveils how the present moment uses the legalization of social dissatisfactions as a way to manage collective aspirations and their political horizons. In this way, the law functions for those in need, as well as for their spectators, as *Pharmakon*: it is cure and poison at the same time. [6]

To overcome this – one that seems more prevalent in the postcolonial Global South and its neo-developmental states than it does in the ‘First World’ – Sircar invites us to explore alternative registers that are already present in social struggles such as the one we have been examining. His invitation is to advance a “radical reimagination of

emancipation”, one ‘that is not trapped in the [current order], but rather is embedded in and embodied by the everyday and ordinary struggles’. [7] For Sircar, these alternative registers are detours. They allow us to ‘traverse uncharted paths to arrive at our favour destinations’. [8]

My aim in this exercise, a detour of its own, has been to locate the struggles of the group of IDPs that I followed in Bogotá in 2009 within, and as a result of, the current global order. And in doing so, I have situated the ghostly appearances that occurred in the refuge offered to them by the administration of Bogotá as the outcome of, and as a testament to, the way in which their claims for justice went unheard. In my attention to the interconnection between the situation of the group and the uncanny, I wanted to reveal the dense layering of forces that shape the daily life of many people, like the IDPs, who are engaged in popular struggles.

In my view, in order to respond to the density of forces existing in popular struggles, one should start by accepting the limits of (apparently already-disenchanted) official administrative responses and their laws. It seems more productive to understand official and legal responses as operating in an enchanted milieu, while still pushing a pedagogy of disenchantment.

Departing from this understanding, it might be more possible to see how what appear to be just mundane practices of administration and legal management of social affairs are often, in fact, exercises in obscuring from view the violence that is continually endured by “most of the world”. At the same time, remaining on the realm of enchantment enables us to see how the current global order,

with its particular form of political economy, functions not as an indeterminate system in which suffering occurs simply thanks to mismanagement or the absence of law. Instead, we can remain aware of how the current global order works, as Marx and Engles put it also in the Communist Manifesto, as ‘a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, [that] it is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world [which] he has called up by his spells”. [9]

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Read the other parts of the essay here:

[Part I: “Dense Struggle \(I\): Violence and the otherworldly”](#)

[Part II: “Dense Struggle \(II\): Oh yes, that, our world”](#)

[Part III: “Dense Struggle \(III\): The Modern Uncanny”](#)

[This text appeared first on Critical Legal Thinking.](#)

Footnotes

[1] See especially, Max Weber, The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism. (Stephen Kalberg trans, first published 1920, Oxford University Press, 4th ed, 2009); Max Weber, ‘Politics as Vocation’ in David Owen and Tracy B. Strong

(eds), *The Vocation Lectures* (Rodney Livingstone trans, first published 1919, Hackett, 2004).

[2] Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, 'Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony' (1999) 26(2) *American Ethnologist* 279.

[3] Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures in Psychoanalysis* (James Strachey trans, first published 1933, Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1964).

[4] Ibid.

[5] Oishik Sircar, 'Spectacles of Emancipation: Reading Rights Differently in India's Legal Discourse' (2012) 49 *Osgoode Hall Law School* 527.

[6] Ibid. Sircar borrows here from Derrida's reading of *Pharmakon*: Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* (Barbara Johnson trans, The University of Chicago Press, 1981).

[7] bid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] See on this vein, Arundhati Roy, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* (Haymarket Books, 2014).

ISSN 2510-2567

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